



# REDESIGNING LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF A MULTILINGUAL INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

In our country, formal education is unavailable to many minority language communities living in remote and inaccessible areas. The “right to education” becomes illusory and as a result they have access to only “non-indigenous” forms of education. The risk of misunderstanding or ignoring the tribal or indigenous cultures or portraying them in a negative manner is inherent in mainstream education. The result is a cultural mismatch between the indigenous languages and the dominant languages of instruction due to which the learners cannot relate to the curriculum materials and the classroom interaction and instruction styles. Teaching methods are also unrelated to cultural learning styles. In the light of this, the need of the hour is to redesign language curriculum and pedagogy to meet the challenges of a multilingual India.

**KEYWORDS:** minority language communities, Right to Education, non-indigenous, dominant languages of instruction, multilingual.

## INTRODUCTION

Multilingual Education (MLE) aims to develop appropriate cognitive and reasoning skills enabling children to use their native, state and national languages efficiently in different social settings. Through a structured language learning programme, children are able to build a strong foundation in their first language, adding second and third languages progressively, thereby enabling them to use all the languages for life-long learning. (Malone, 2005). Multilingual education is also multicultural as learning begins in the child's home environment and bridges to the wider world. This allows the children to maintain their own language and culture, at the same time providing them the opportunity for national and second language acquisition and instruction. (Cummins, 2000). As a result, learners are able to contribute to the society and the nation together with taking pride in upholding their linguistic and cultural heritage.

If the mother tongue of children is not utilised, they tend to have extremely low proficiency levels in all the languages. It is important to develop their mother tongue to enable them to become fluent readers and writers and to enhance the understanding of the vocabulary and structure of their own language. This inability to understand the nuances of their mother tongue impairs their capabilities to learn the other languages. According to Thomas and Collier (2002) *“English (L2) language learners immersed in the English (L2) mainstream... showed large decreases in reading and math achievement by grade 5 when compared to students who received bilingual/ESL services. The largest number of dropouts came from this group.”*

Linguists have been advocating the use of mother tongues in education in the tribal regions of India since a long time, but positive steps in this direction have only recently been taken in some states and central government and government institutions. Institutions such as National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT) and The Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) have been actively involved in promoting work on bilingual and multilingual education programmes. After a lot of discussion on the need for using mother tongues in primary education programmes, state governments with the help of the linguistic department of the universities, local NGOs, national and international MLE consultant support and tribal communities have begun to design, develop, implement, monitor and evaluate MLE programmes. In a few places, resource centres for language and curriculum development have been established where training of teaching staff takes place and resource teams for each language group have been formed.

## Planning Multilingual Education Programmes

Planning for MLE (Multilingual Education) requires knowledge of the contexts in which the programme will take place. There are several general purposes for doing research before beginning planning. The most important out of these are to collect information that will help develop a plan that is appropriate for the particular community and to have information about the learners' linguistic level before the programme starts so that progress can be evaluated later on. Preliminary research can help strengthen the programme by providing information for planning the programme and “baseline information” about the community before the programme begins. This information can be used in the future for evaluating programme impact. The following information will be helpful while planning the programme:

- Preliminary research. This includes collecting information that will be used to plan and implement the programme such as information about the mother

tongue which will be the foundation for the entire programme plan. It will be especially helpful for planning curriculum and developing reading materials.

- Developing an orthography (writing system). This involves identifying the symbols that will form the writing system (if the language has never been written before) or adapting an older writing system to fit the language as it is spoken now. Information about the writing system for the language incorporates questions such as is there a writing system already? If so, does it represent the meaningful parts of the language adequately? Is it acceptable to most of the people who will be using it? Is it useable across dialects? Will it help readers to transfer between the local language and the national language? This information will tell us if the current writing system is acceptable to the people and if it helps them learn to read and write. It also might tell us that we need to make changes in the writing system. If the writing system does need to be changed, this research will help us learn if the community will need consultant help from outside.
- Information about the ways teachers use reading and writing in the local language. What kinds of things do people read? What do they write? What kind of reading materials do people have in their homes? What languages do they use for reading and writing? The answers to these questions would provide invaluable insights on literacy in the mother tongue.
- Information about the reading and writing ability of people in the community and especially the students, in their mother tongue and in other languages. This information will help us to identify the type of classes that we should start. It also provides information that we can use later to see if the education programme is making a difference in helping people become literate.
- Developing curriculum and instructional materials. This incorporates selecting the teaching methods that will be used, developing teachers' guides and planning the content of the lessons.
- Developing literature. This includes writing, illustrating, editing, testing, producing and distributing a variety of graded reading materials in the local language that are interesting to the readers. The process of literature production can be successful with the participation of the members of the language community. They can create authentic material drawing on their experiences and imagination; translate their traditional oral literature into written form; source majority language materials that originate from outside the community and adapt them to the local language and context and/or use materials from other languages by translating them into their mother tongue.
- Evaluating the programme. This involves assessing the programme and the students' progress regularly to find out if the programme is serving the needs of the community and if we are achieving the programme's objectives. It also involves keeping records of the planning and implementation process and of the students' progress.

Any curricular reform ought to take into consideration the fact that whatever appears relevant and essential today may not be suitable for tomorrow. Curriculum in countries such as India bases itself on the diverse characteristics of the nation with its multiplicities. To enable the learners to connect with real life situations, goals for a comprehensive language curriculum needs to bring in aspects of

language, culture, practices of people in the learning process in accordance with the local needs and concerns. A national curriculum (in language education) should aim for: ... *a cohesive curricular policy based on guiding principles for language teaching and acquisition, which allows for a variety of implementations suitable to local needs and resources, and which provides illustrative models for use.* (Position Paper on Teaching of English NCERT - 2005 p.3)

### Implications for the Language Curriculum

The aims of language education are governed by different needs and concerns of a curricular framework. A curricular content presents textbook developers the scope for designing materials to enable the teachers to move beyond the confines of the textbook to include examples from the immediate surroundings of the learners. A good syllabus should help the learners attain proficiency in the language/s in different social settings. For years 1-3, locally relevant curriculum and instructional materials should focus on building a strong foundation in speaking, listening, reading and writing and developing academic concepts in the mother tongue based in local culture. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) can be used as a guide to curriculum content and teaching methods in the case of India. To develop curriculum and for materials and training workshops, mother tongue teachers and resource persons from the language group should be identified and they should work together with the linguists and NGOs, MLE specialists and consultants.

The state run schools should ensure that the curriculum provides adequate exposure to the learners in terms of language and materials (input) that would present the language in contexts through authentic texts (Krashen, 1985). Tasks and activities should enable children to engage with the language and interact and develop their communication skills. To make the teaching-learning scenario rural learner centered, the language curriculum should:

- Acquire a holistic approach to language planning in which English language education has a complementary and supplementary role in the whole of language education.
- Adopt multilingualism as a practice for the learning of languages and other subjects to enable the learners to relate to the context of teaching and associate their life experiences outside the school with the classroom happenings. In this manner, the home languages of children could be used as an invaluable resource for the teaching-learning of languages and other content subjects (NCF 2005).
- Create an environment conducive to (English) language learning in the classroom and to enable the learners to use these languages for different purposes outside the classroom. Bilingual/multilingual teachers who are proficient in the mother tongue(s) of the learners and English should be employed for this purpose. Activities and assignments that give opportunities to the children to use languages to explore the world outside the textbook and the classroom should be exploited. Newspapers, magazines, radio and other audio-visual aids should be used for this purpose.

The greatest challenge to the sustainability of MLE programmes is the lack of literature in the learners' home language. Since graded reading materials are unavailable in many communities to help children gain reading fluency and comprehension skills in their mother tongue, they are unable to take advantage of these materials to help them transfer what they have learned about reading and writing in their mother tongue into their second language. As revealed by research and experience throughout the world, teachers and other mother tongue speakers can, with basic training and support, develop a lot of reading material required by the learners. Some children start reading in their mother tongue/first language (L1). After they gain fluency in the mother tongue, they want to transfer their learning in their MT into their second language (L2), which could be a language of wider communication in their country, the national language or an international language. Thus, they wish to be able to continue reading both in their L1 and L2. Literature is required to facilitate the readers in this process.

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